

Unique Dive Site
Crystal River
Kings Bay, Florida

*Close encounters of the third kind
with a 2000 pound kitten*





“Meoww”

Crystal River

ant of the Vikings, who crossed the Atlantic in open boats, was a woos. I just don't like to be cold all right? And neither do the manatees, it seems, which is why they congregate in this relatively small area of Kings Bay each year.

Kings Bay, which is approximately two miles in diameter or 600 acres, is home to the largest concentration of manatees in the world. The inlet is a bit warmer than the surrounding seas, and despite their generous layer of blubber, the water temperature in the spring-fed rivers, which ranges from 20-22°C (68-72°F), makes for a somewhat cosier place to over-winter than the open coastline.

“Hello there”

Before we entered the water, our dive guide warned us of the state's policy against harassment of the animals—as with all wildlife, one cannot catch or feed animals, but also one cannot pursue them, ride them or otherwise harass them. However, we were told, if a manatee came up to us on its own accord, it may want a scratch on the head or belly, which we could do with only one hand at a time.

At first, I saw nothing in the murky waters but then I noticed a blimp-shaped silhouette to my right. It was an approaching manatee all right, and it had spotted me. He got closer and closer ... and closer ... until the giant creature just bumped right into me, albeit gently. Once I got over my shock over such an unabashed direct approach of making my acquaintance—no introductions necessary, it seems—I reached out and scratched the cuddly creature right on its coarse head, which immediately produced what I interpreted as an ecstatic expression—or so I imagined.

The manatees are not exactly the prettiest creatures on the planet. They are grey and wrinkly and have coarse skin that is sometimes infested with

Text and photos by Peter Symes

I once had a cat that approached me exactly like that. Coming right at me, top of the head first until ... bump ... “scratch me!” It then slowly rolled over onto its back to blissfully enjoy a good belly-rub.

Only this ‘kitty’ was a 2000-pounder, with flippers instead of paws, but still, unmistakably cute and cuddly.

A close encounter with the docile manatee leaves no one untouched. These gentle giants seem friendly and curious, as they seek out close contact with humans.

At first, I did not know what to expect. This wee grey November morning in northern Florida seemed a far cry from the archetypical tourist imagery of a tropical paradise. There were palm trees alright, but it was a bit nippy and windy, and that water seemed a bit turbid. As I quietly entered the water—in order not to frighten any manatees—and the cool water started seeping into my wetsuit, I longed for my drysuit and woollies.

Okay, so this undersigned descend-

“So who are you then?”





algae. And their eyes are like those on a potato—not exactly winners of a beauty contest. Yet, is hard not to become enchanted with them, as they come across as being very peaceful, docile and social... and they move with much grace.

Mermaid Myth

Manatees belong to the mammalian order called *Sirenia*. The word *siren* comes from the ancient Greeks who had a fable about beautiful girls that lived in the sea, called *sirens*, whom we have come to know as mermaids—creatures that were half girl and half fish. These girls sang very beautiful songs that would put sailors in a trance. Hypnotized by these songs, the sailors would run their ships onto rocks and sink.

For a long time it was common belief that these beautiful and strange creatures were real. The

songs heard by sailors were probably whale songs. But what about the eye-reports? What the sailors saw were not really mermaids, naturally, but manatees.

Manatees do not stick their heads out of the water to breathe. Looking down at these creatures under the water, people could only see some strangely shaped creature swimming by. The front half of this creature had a head and arm-like flippers and the back half had a tail like a fish. It didn't require much of a vivid imagination to connect the dots—it had to be a mermaid.

“Scratchy”

After spending the better part of an hour in the middle of Kings Bay with “Scratchy”—the nickname we gave to our newfound itchy and affectionate manatee friend—the coolness of the water finally had the better of us,

and we retreated back onto the dive boat for a much welcomed hot cup of coffee.

During this little break, we were taken to another nearby canal where the water was much clearer, and through a narrow passage under the trees—too narrow for any boat to pass—we could swim into that appeared to be another little maze of smaller channels.

The clear water in here had a beautiful deep blue hue, as we swam inwards. At first, there were no other creatures around, but then, I turned around to see a mother and a calf catching up with us from behind. They swam right by us, as if we weren't even there. They seemed determined to get somewhere specific right away. The young one was sticking very close by its mother's side.

Coming around the next corner, we found the pair just relaxing in

Is this the real mermaid? TOP LEFT: Kodak moment with manatee





encourage a “look, but don’t touch” policy. But local conservationists of ManateeProtection.com are pushing for more enforcement, stating on their website:

“The reality is that there are already a number of tame manatees in the area and contact will continue. It should not be reinforced and new animals should not be conditioned to accept a human presence without caution. As custodians for the manatee in Citrus County, the USFWS must assure their long term health and safety by limiting physical contact through some form of no touch rule.”

Opponents of the policy, mainly dive operators, say they would lose up to 30 percent of their business, if they did not let their customers touch the manatees. But new tours are already being developed where education through observation only is the emphasis. ■

Crystal River, Florida

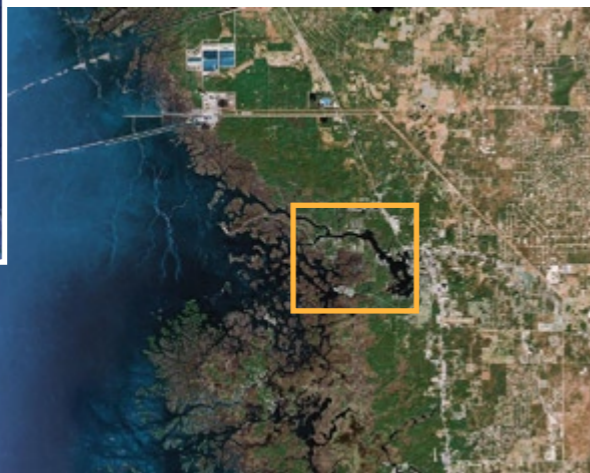
Crystal River is both a river and a city with a population of 3,600 in Citrus County at the heart of the Nature Coast of Florida, United States. The city was incorporated in 1903 and is the self professed “Home of the Manatee”. The City is situated around Kings Bay, which is spring-fed so keeps a constant temperature year round. Kings Bay is home to nearly 400 manatee during the winter and is one of the few places where people can interact with them in their natural habitat. Crystal River Preserve State Park is located nearby, and Crystal River Archaeological State Park is located in the city’s northwest side. ■

what looked like a little lake at the end of the maze. The young one looked as if it was given permission to go out

the mother and the calf. It may not be an aggressive species, but you should never underestimate parental instincts. At least I didn’t want to stress any of them, so I kept my respectful distance.

It is against the law to harass or pursue the manatees in any way. So, if they are sleeping or eating on the bottom, they should be left alone.

federal level, but were downgraded to “threatened” at the state level in 2006. However, there are continued reports of tourists harassing the animals and boat collisions maiming a significant number of manatees each year. According to ManateeProtection.com, a “no touch” policy is needed to ensure the protection of the manatees in Crystal River. The group of local conservationists is appealing to the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) to consider and implement such a policy. The existing guidelines of the state Fish and Wildlife Service



and play, because it was frolicking around and curiously investigating different matters on its own, while the mother was keeping a watchful eye out for the youngster. While manatees are friendly creatures I didn’t feel like approaching the young one and coming in between

Controversy

Manatees are still classified as an “endangered” species on the



It is against the law to pursue the manatees in any way. So if they are sleeping or eating on the bottom, they should be left alone. This cousin resting on the riverbed seemed sound asleep